

# **General Creighton Abrams' Conduct of Design in Operational Art during the Vietnam War**

**A Monograph  
by  
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## **Abstract**

General Creighton Abrams' Conduct of Operational Design by MAJOR Kevin Anthony Poole, U.S. Army, 43 pages.

General Abrams presents a sound historical example of the practical application of operational art as viewed through the lens of the Army Design Methodology. When General Abrams' assumed command of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), he was able to frame his environment enabling him to enact measures to solve the correct problem which was, how to equip and train the ARVN while simultaneously focusing on population centric efforts in counterinsurgency—ultimately eliminating the need for U.S. presence in Vietnam. Under his authority, American forces were broken up into small units that would live with and train the South Vietnamese civilians to defend their villages from guerrilla or conventional Northern incursions. Not only did he successfully frame the problem in 1968 but he was able to re-frame in 1970 in accordance with the Nixon administration's abrupt announcement of a rapid withdrawal of forces from Vietnam. These efforts proved successful as evidenced by the ability of ARVN forces to repel a full-scale NVA Easter Offensive in 1972. This study validates the Army Design Methodology as a framework for the assessment operational art.

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# Introduction

The Vietnam War represents a prime example of how tactical actions, when not properly linked to strategic and political objectives, can have little to no effect on the success of any military endeavor. The undertakings of the civilian and military leadership in the early years of the war demonstrated the negative effects of non-existent operational art as evidenced by the state of affairs following the Tet Offensive in 1968. Operational art requires leaders that demonstrate a sound awareness and understanding of their environment as well as the ability to synchronize tactical assets and activities, in time and space, to achieve a strategic endstate.<sup>1</sup> General Creighton Abrams and his performance as the commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) from 1968 until his ascendance to Chief of Staff of the Army in 1972 was an example of successful execution of operational art.

An important aspect of operational art is the application of critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe complex, ill-structured problems and develop approaches to solve them. This application is referred to, in the current Army lexicon, as the Army Design Methodology.<sup>2</sup> While there is debate as to what a complex and ill-structured problem is, very few could argue against General Abrams' predicament when he assumed command of MACV in 1968 as such. He inherited an awkward chain of command, lack of unified operational control over South Vietnamese and other allied forces, severe geographical and procedural restrictions on the conduct of war and greatly diminished domestic support. Included in this complexity was the overarching problem of how to conduct operations to set strategic conditions for the deterrence of

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of the Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington D.C: Government printing Office [GPO], October 2011), 9.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Army Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington D.C: Government printing Office [GPO], 26 March 2010), 3-1.

communist North Vietnamese influence in South Vietnam<sup>3</sup> General Abrams' situation in 1968 definitely required the aforementioned aspect of operational art as defined in the Army Design Methodology.

Fundamentally, the Army Design Methodology is comprised of three activities: the environmental frame, the problem frame and the consideration of operational approaches. The environmental frame involves selecting, organizing, interpreting, and defining a complex reality to provide boundaries for analyzing, understanding, and acting. The problem frame involves understanding and isolating the underlying causes of conflict, identifying and defining the fundamental problem to solve. Finally, the consideration of an operational approach provides focus and sets boundaries for identifying possible actions to transform the conditions of the operational environment to a desired future endstate.<sup>4</sup> Essential to this methodology is the ability to re-frame the problem as necessary based on recognized changes in the environment. This must be an iterative process throughout. There is no checklist for this process. Like any other art, there are no quantifiable tools to measure successful execution of the Army Design Methodology. As stated by General Mattis, "thinking, foresight, instinct, experience, and visualization are particularly important during the early design effort, when identifying the true nature of a complex problem and designing an approach to the solution will drive subsequent planning and execution."<sup>5</sup>

While this process sounds simple, there has been a considerable amount of obfuscation regarding the Army Design Methodology since its introduction into Army intellectual circles in

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Edward C. Cardon, BG, "Unleashing Design, Planning and the Art of Battle Command." *Military Review*, (March-April 2010): 8-10.

<sup>5</sup> James N. Mattis, General, *Vision for a Joint Approach to Operational Design*. Memorandum to U.S. Joint Forces Command, 6 October 2009.

2005. Some misconstrue the Army Design Methodology as a replacement for the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP). Others, when they hear the term design, envisage a cluster of School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) students, huddled around a white board scribbling out ethereal concepts with no links to anything of tactical and operational relevance. Others view the Army Design Methodology as a groundbreaking thought process that emerged as a result of the dynamic nature of conflict since 2001.

One of the foci of this monograph is to help dispel some of the above-mentioned misconceptions using the case study of General Abrams and his command of the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV). Design is not a replacement for the MDMP rather; it is a conceptual part of the planning process, which complements detailed planning.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, the essence of the Army Design Methodology is nothing new. Operational artists, at least the good ones, possess the innate cognitive creativity and adaptability that naturally lead them to execute design and have been doing so long before the inception of the term and long before the towers of the World Trade Center fell in September 2001. General Abrams and his actions after he assumed command of MACV from General Westmoreland speak to this point.

Under the command of General William Westmoreland from 1965 up until 1968, success was predicated upon measures of performance such as enemy versus friendly casualties. General Westmoreland's approach, while nested within what he understood to be the Johnson administration endstate, did not adjust tactical activities in time and space to account for a rapidly changing political and strategic landscape following the Tet offensive in 1968.

When General Abrams' assumed command of MACV, he was able to frame his environment enabling him to enact measures to solve the correct problem which was, how to

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<sup>6</sup> Colonel Wayne W. Grigsby, Jr., U.S. Army; Dr. Scott Gorman; Colonel Jack Marr, U.S. Army; Lieutenant Colonel Joseph McLamb, U.S. Army; Dr. Michael Stewart; and Dr. Pete Schifferle, "Integrated Planning The Operations Process, Design, and the Military Decision Making Process." *Military Review*, (January-February 2011): 29.



equip and train the ARVN while simultaneously focusing on population centric efforts in counterinsurgency—ultimately eliminating the need for U.S. presence in the region. Under his authority, American forces were broken up into small units that would live with and train the South Vietnamese civilians to defend their villages from guerrilla or conventional Northern incursions. Not only did he successfully frame the problem in 1968 but he was also able to re-frame in 1970 in accordance with the Nixon administration's abrupt announcement of a rapid withdrawal of forces from Vietnam. These efforts proved successful as evidenced by the events that transpired during the Cambodia Campaign as well as the ability of ARVN forces to repel a full-scale NVA Easter Offensive in 1972. Even though the result of the Vietnam War was a strategic failure, General Abrams and his MACV staff did successfully sequence tactical actions to achieve the Nixon Administration endstate up until 1973.

The purpose of this monograph is to elucidate how General Abrams presents a sound historical example of the practical application of operational art as viewed through the lens of the Army Design Methodology. Furthermore, this study will validate the Army Design Methodology as a valid framework for the assessment of operational art.

This study will establish a framework for analysis by outlining the political and strategic objectives of the Johnson administration to provide context for the operational approach to the war taken by General Westmoreland. This will allude to shortcomings of General Westmoreland regarding the recognition of changes in the strategic and operational environment. The background will conclude with the discussion of events and circumstances that led to the replacement of General Westmoreland with General Abrams as well as an introduction to evidence that suggests that Abrams was successful in a manner that can be demonstrated through the use of the Army Design Methodology as an analytical framework. The major events addressed will include Abrams' environmental and problem frame in 1968 that led him to the One War strategy. Additionally, the study will discuss his re-framing in 1970 caused by the

Nixon administration decision to expedite the U.S. withdrawal of forces out of Vietnam. The analysis of the Cambodia campaign and the Spring Offensive of 1972 will provide proof of principle that successful operational artists have always intuitively used the precepts presently known as the Army Design Methodology. This will affirm the hypothesis that the Army Design Methodology is a sound tool for the analysis of operational art.

Much scholarly work has been devoted to the analysis of the American involvement in the Vietnam War from 1955 to 1975. The preponderance of these works focus their efforts on the events and circumstances leading to the buildup of U.S. troops in 1965 as well as the many decisions that led to the strategic and political failures up to 1968. Relatively fewer works highlight the tactical and operational aspects of the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1973.

David Halberstam encapsulates the works dedicated to the strategic and geopolitical antecedents that led to the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in his book *The Making of a Quagmire*.<sup>7</sup> Halberstam lays out, in detail, the foundations of the conflict with an emphasis on decisions based on misconceptions in the Kennedy era. The decisions that he discusses sets conditions for the environment that the Johnson administration and the military under Westmoreland found itself in. Halberstam's work along with various others is important to highlight and analyze in order to provide Strategic context for the actions and decisions that Westmoreland made.

Brigadier General H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* serves as a sound representation of all that transpired in the years following the Kennedy administration from both a strategic and operational perspective.<sup>8</sup> He provides an analytical account of the Johnson administration, particularly, the dynamic that existed between President Johnson, Secretary McNamara and the

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<sup>7</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: Knopf, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1997).

Joint Chiefs of Staff. This is significant because lack of communication and synchronization at the strategic level, whether it was inadvertent or by design, was a major contributing factor to the inability to properly frame the environment they were in.

The notion of lack of communication and synchronization is further examined by Colonel Harry Summers in his work *On Strategy*. His central thesis posits that a lack of military theory and military strategy (especially the relationship between military strategy and national policy) led to a faulty definition of the nature of war. The result was the exhaustion of the Army against a secondary guerilla force and the ultimate failure of military strategy to support the national policy of containment of communist expansion.<sup>9</sup> General Westmoreland, while not completely culpable for the Vietnam failure, should have recognized and properly accounted for the political ambiguity in which he was operating under. This sets the proverbial stage for the discussion of how General Abrams performed in contrast to his predecessor.

Lewis Sorley's book *A Better War* outlines the actions of General Abrams after the Tet offensive in 1968.<sup>10</sup> He sheds light on the often-omitted years of the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1975. Sorley's work provides an in-depth look at how General Abrams transcribed President Nixon's policy into an operational course of action that would achieve successful results.

This monograph takes Lewis Sorley's *A Better War* a step further by specifically analyzing General Abrams' tenure at the helm of MACV through the lens of the Army Design Methodology. This study will also analyze the environment that General Westmoreland encountered and how he fared based on the tenets of the Army Design Methodology to provide context for the main focus. As mentioned before, this will also validate the Army Design Methodology as a good tool to assess operational art

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<sup>9</sup> Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, (Novato California: Presidio Press, 1982), xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).

## **Section I. Background**

In any discussion of the Vietnam War, one invokes thoughts of a conflict marred with domestic political unrest resulting in the withdrawal of U.S. forces in defeat. The infamous scene of the UH1 Huey helicopter lifting U.S. citizens off the roof of the embassy in 1975 signified and encapsulated a monumental failure in the history of the United States. Contrary to this indelible moment in the collective memory of the American people, the war garnered majority popular support up until 1968. Additionally, the operational efforts by U.S. forces after 1968 up until 1972 proved to be successful. Many of the reasons for the ultimate failure of the Vietnam War rest within the months preceding the escalation and buildup of forces in Vietnam. The most important of reasons for failure was the inability to clearly define and understand the environment in Southeast Asia.

The inability to frame and define the environment was exhibited by the National Security Council at the political level as well as MACV from an operational standpoint. This inability to understand the environment ultimately led to the development of the wrong operational approach to solving the problem. Before there is a discussion about General Abrams' demonstration of operational art, it is important to first analyze the political and strategic objectives of the Johnson administration to provide context for the operational approach to the war taken by General Westmoreland. This will facilitate the identification of shortcomings of General Westmoreland regarding the recognition of changes in the strategic and operational environment. In order to examine the Johnson administration strategy and its understanding of the environment in Southeast Asia, it is important to first understand the Kennedy administration view on the situation in Vietnam.

Kennedy's policy toward South Vietnam rested on the assumption that Ngo Dinh Diem (the President of South Vietnam) and his force's ability to defeat the guerrillas without help from

the United States. He was against the deployment of American combat troops and observed that "to introduce U.S. forces in large numbers there today, while it might have an initially favorable military impact, would almost certainly lead to adverse political and, in the long run, adverse military consequences."<sup>11</sup> President Kennedy's concerns rested with the Soviet Union's development of nuclear weapons and whether the U.S. was keeping pace with them.

In November 1961, General Maxwell Taylor recommended to President Kennedy that the United States move beyond its advisory role to take a more active role in planning and executing operations in support of the South Vietnamese government. This recommendation also involved the increase in troops beyond advisory missions.<sup>12</sup> The result was President Kennedy's approval of a reinforced advisory effort, and the additional deployment of fixed- and rotary-wing air units and a variety of other specialized American military elements.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Kennedy decided against General Taylor's recommendation of an additional 8,000 Soldiers in November, his increased advisory course of action called for a substantial increase in troops. This increase in troops called for a change in the charter as well as the organization of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) into something closely resembling an operational headquarters in a theater of war—ultimately leading to the establishment of Military Assistance Command Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

President Kennedy's decisions were taking place in the backdrop of political instability within the South Vietnamese government. This instability was brought on primarily because of popular discontent with Diem—a Catholic president of a primarily Buddhist country. Diem's

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<sup>11</sup> *Pentagon Papers Volume 3*, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*. (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2006), 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> George S Eckhardt, *Command and Control* (Department of the Army, 1991), 22.

government was plagued with corruption and guilty of religious prosecution. Additionally, Diem's government had many officials that aligned themselves with communist North Vietnam.<sup>15</sup>

With the assassinations Ngo Dinh Diem on 2 November 1963 and John F. Kennedy three weeks later, President Johnson found himself in a political and strategic environment that he was not prepared to understand. Diem's fall left a void in the South Vietnamese government in which many within the United States government thought was unsalvageable. By 1963, most U.S. agencies had conceded that the government of Saigon position had been worsening for long before Diem's fall and that the potential for early improvement were low. Some officials predicted an outright allied defeat. After a late December visit to South Vietnam, Secretary McNamara declared, "Current trends, unless reversed in the next two to three months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state."<sup>16</sup>

President Johnson faced additional challenges concerning trust and confidence within his administration following his assumption of office. Immediately after taking office, he relieved three of McGeorge Bundy's military aides because "they get in the way." When Pentagon officials protested these firings, President Johnson's response was to "tell the admiral and the general that if their little men like that believe they can pressure me their Commander in Chief on what his strategy ought to be in war or what his decision ought to be in peace.....then they don't know their Commander in Chief." President Johnson's sentiment was most likely the residual effects of resentment over the fact that the military did not pay any attention to him when he was Vice President.<sup>17</sup>

President Johnson preferred policies and advice only from those who shared his viewpoints and were loyal to him. This set conditions for Robert McNamara, who shared the

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<sup>15</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1991), 326.

<sup>16</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command*, 117.

<sup>17</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1997), 52.

same preoccupations as Johnson, to assert himself as the primary force in the policy making process. This relationship established McNamara as President Johnson's "oracle for Vietnam" and set conditions for his concept of "Graduated Pressure."<sup>18</sup>

The rapport between President Johnson and Secretary McNamara allowed the secretary to employ his idea of Graduated Pressure. McNamara's concept of Graduated Pressure traced its roots back to the Cuban Missile Crisis. This strategy's aim was to communicate American intentions to the enemy through gradually increasing pressure on the enemy. President Johnson was partial to this strategy because it did not severely impact domestic politics as opposed to noticeable response.<sup>19</sup>

This approach was met with considerable opposition by some of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and significantly decreased their ability to influence civilian decision making who had adopted Graduated Pressure as an infallible approach. General LeMay was the main opposition to this strategy who, in contrast with General Taylor, simply did not understand the methodology of Graduated Pressure. While Graduated Pressure only lasted until early 1965, it set conditions for ambiguity and confusion amongst the national command authorities, which ultimately filtered down the chain of command.<sup>20</sup>

The existing of challenges presented a strategic context in which General Westmoreland would have to navigate when he assumed command of Military Assistance Command Vietnam in June of 1964. This environment contributed directly to his inability to frame the environment and, more importantly, identify the correct problem to solve. This inability resulted in the wrong approach, which continued uncorrected until 1968.

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<sup>18</sup> McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 63.

Westmoreland was observed as “ambitious and politically astute, he associated himself with the fashionable military trends of the 1960s, espousing efficient, scientific management in the McNamara style (as a brigadier general, he took an advanced management course at the Harvard Graduate School of Business) and introducing counterinsurgency into the West Point curriculum.”<sup>21</sup> General Westmoreland’s systematic mindset and his almost absolute loyalty to his superiors appealed to Johnson and McNamara.

As early as 1964, the major line of effort of US forces in Vietnam was the execution of OPLAN 34. This included the covert use of South Vietnamese airborne and amphibious raids into Laos and North Vietnam to disrupt the movement of enemy troops, supplies, and equipment into South Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> This would evolve to include the use of air operations. In conjunction with the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, this stimulated a change in position on the part of the Johnson administration.

The conduct of OPLAN 34 required the operation, maintenance, and security of airbases throughout South Vietnam. General Westmoreland’s concern was focused on infantry and mortar attacks on the bases that were to carry out operations against North Vietnam. In Westmoreland’s assessment, “the South Vietnamese Army, which was responsible for protecting the American bases, could do so only by diverting already thinly spread units from pacification and territorial

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<sup>21</sup> The standard biography is Furgurson, *Westmoreland*. For a less flattering sketch, see Halberstam, *Best and Brightest*, pp. 663–82. *Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports*, pp. 9, 27–28, 39–43, 65–67, 102, and 240, describes his introduction to Vietnam and previous involvement with counterinsurgency. Other views of Westmoreland: Palmer, *25-Year War*, p. 40; Weede Interv, 23 Jul 73, pp. 11–12. Interview, Senior Officers Debriefing Program with Gen Harold K. Johnson, 27 Jan 72–30 Oct 74, sec. 15, pp. 20–21 and sec. 16, pp. 11–12, MHI.

<sup>22</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command*, 159.



security missions at the risk of serious loss of government control over sizeable areas and their populations.”<sup>23</sup>

General Westmoreland’s concerns prompted him to request forces be deployed to theater in support of the security of airbase operations. Among the requested forces were either the 173rd Airborne on Okinawa or one brigade from the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii as well as an Army logistics command of 3,500 officers and an engineer group of 2,400.<sup>24</sup> The Joint Chiefs initially did not respond positively to General Westmoreland’s requests. The overarching political overtones, at the time did not bode well for the outright increase of forces in Vietnam.

The tone of the President and the Secretary of Defense in the early months of 1965 contradicted their previous views when they rejected Westmoreland’s requests for forces. The motivating factor behind this change in approach were the increased insurgent attacks against American forces to include the bombing of the Brink Hotel on 24 December 1964.<sup>25</sup> This created confusion with General Westmoreland and his staff at Military Assistance Command Vietnam with regards to the direction of the war effort.

This confusion was further exacerbated given the fact that General Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor both, initially advised against a large-scale escalation of the war with increased troops. They maintained this viewpoint even though President Johnson leaned toward increasing the role of ground combat troops in the war. The president ultimately denied Taylor’s

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<sup>23</sup>Msg, COMUSMACV MAC 8149 to CINCPAC, 15 Aug 64, NSC History Tonkin Gulf. MACV Command History, 1964, p. 162. For the appearance of jets at North Vietnamese fields in August, see Futrell, *Advisory Years*, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup>MACV Command History, 1964, p. 136; *ibid.*, 1965, pp. 104–05. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 127. CINCPAC’s part in the logistical debate is described in Marolda and Fitzgerald, *Assistance to Combat*, pp. 361–65.

<sup>25</sup>Futrell, *Advisory Years*, pp. 253–54; and Memo, Westmoreland for Taylor, 24 Nov 64, sub: Fact Sheet on Bien Hoa Incident, tab 18, Westmoreland Hist File 10 (14 Nov–7 Dec 64). Ltr, Westmoreland to Khanh, 4 Nov 64, tab 29, Westmoreland Hist File 9 (9 Oct–13 Nov 64) is typical of efforts to pressure the South Vietnamese to improve security. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 323–24, 332–33, summarizes mission requests for reprisals.

and Westmoreland's requests for air strikes in retaliation for the Brink BOQ bombing but pressed upon them increased focus on new initiatives within South Vietnam. "I have never felt that this war will be won from the air," Johnson told Taylor:

It seems to me that what is much more needed and would be more effective is a larger and stronger use of rangers and Special Forces and marines, or other appropriate military strength on the ground and on the scene. I am ready to look with great favor on that kind of increased American effort, directed at the guerrillas and aimed to stiffen the aggressiveness of Vietnamese military units up and down the line. Any recommendation that you or General Westmoreland make in this sense will have immediate attention from me, although I know that it may involve the acceptance of larger American sacrifices. We have been building our strength to fight this kind of war ever since 1961, and I myself am ready to substantially increase the number of Americans in Vietnam if it is necessary to provide this kind of fighting force against the Viet Cong.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to this contradiction in vision, the National Command Authorities countermanded General Westmoreland's freedom of initiative by reprimanding him for suggesting that he should share information with the South Vietnamese Army regarding bombing operations in North Vietnam. Regarding the details of operation Rolling Thunder, Admiral Sharp, Commander in Chief United States Forces Pacific Command, told Westmoreland that he should only give the South Vietnamese forces as little information as possible in order to prevent information from falling into the enemy hands. Admiral Sharp additionally denied General Westmoreland's request to split the airstrike sorties between U.S. forces and South Vietnamese forces.<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, by the spring of 1965 General Westmoreland was in a situation in which he had a difficult time gauging the overarching policy objectives of his political masters from one day to the next. The attention that Westmoreland focused on with regards to trying to understand the events that were transpiring with his bosses in Washington, detracted from his

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<sup>26</sup> Msg, Johnson to Taylor, 30 Dec 64, in NSC History, Major Forces, box 40, LBJL.

<sup>27</sup> Msgs, Wheeler JCS 0739-65 to Westmoreland and Sharp, 1 Mar 65; Sharp to Westmoreland, 2 and 16 Mar 65. All in Westmoreland Msg Files, 1 Jan-31 Mar 65, CMH. Sharp quotes are from the latter two messages.

ability to understand the actual environment in his area of operation and the problem that he faced.

Westmoreland's conundrum increased during the first two months of 1965. What was once understood, even by Westmoreland himself, to be a classic counterinsurgency, was beginning to present hints of a major conventional fight. The change came as a result of sustained Viet Cong victories on the conventional battlefield, specifically in I and II Corps areas of operation, and accruing evidence from prisoners and captured weapons and documents of the enemy's regeneration and expansion. By March, MACV was changing its tone concerning its reports to higher of enemy strength and disposition. The command estimated that, based on the Viet-Cong rate of growth, the enemy could have up to 100 battalions in South Vietnam by 1965. This estimate did not include North Vietnamese regulars. The command began to recognize the potential for the enemy to transition toward large unit major combat operations. Late in January, General Westmoreland made aware to Ambassador Taylor "increasing appearances of VC main forces which either sought open engagement or occupied friendly villages with determination to stay until the RVNAF produced enough combat power to force them to withdraw." A month later, he warned, "That the situation visualized in OPLAN 32 Phase II (RVN) [a requirement for U.S. troops to reinforce the South Vietnamese Army in the counter guerrilla war] may be approaching."<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, in Washington, President Johnson was sending mixed signals to Joint Chiefs with regards to the approach—counterinsurgency versus a conventional offensive. On 19 March

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<sup>28</sup> First quote is from Memo, Westmoreland for Taylor, 25 Jan 65, sub: Weekly Assessment of Military Activity for Period 17–23 Jan 65, tab 8, Westmoreland Hist File 13 (21 Jan–28 Feb 65), CMH. Second is from Msg, COMUSMACV MAC 4999 to JCS, 17 Feb 65, NSC History, Major Forces, box 40, LBJL. The 100-battalion estimate is in USMACV, Commander's Estimate of the Military Situation in South Vietnam, 26 Mar 65, p. 13, tab 38, Westmoreland Hist File 14 (1–26 Mar 65), CMH; in same file, see Memo, Westmoreland for Taylor, 1 Mar 65, sub: Weekly Assessment of Military Activity for Period 21–27 February 1965, tab 5.

1965, General Greene (Marine Corp Commandant) noted that the President had wanted a report on what was being done with regards to “killing more Viet Cong” and did not understand why there had been no movement to that effect thus far.<sup>29</sup> President Johnson, on the other hand, made decisions associated with airstrikes that sent entirely different signals.

On 1 April 1965, President Johnson met with his advisors and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss the way ahead in Vietnam. This meeting laid the foundation for the significant buildup of forces and the approach the United States would take. President Johnson ended his opening remarks with “We got to find em and kill em.”<sup>30</sup> This exhortation, even though it was in the secrecy of a meeting with his advisors and in direct contradiction to the messages he was sending to the American public, was the mantra that would eventually lead to the establishment of the number of enemy killed as the primary measure of effectiveness for the Vietnam War for the next three years.

Westmoreland ended up being the proprietor of this direction established by a fractured National Command Authority wrought with deceit and ambiguity. As mentioned earlier, Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor were of the mindset conducive to pacification and as little major ground combat operations as possible. This still does not dismiss the fact that Westmoreland dutifully prosecuted a war strategy, as directed by the President, which adopted the wrong operational approach to solving the wrong problem.

Based on the reports of increased Viet-Cong growth and the deteriorating situation the South Vietnamese government was in, Westmoreland and the MACV staff were in a difficult position amidst the initial buildup in late 1965. Westmoreland faced the question of how to utilize

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<sup>29</sup> McMaster, *Derelection of Duty*, 250.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 256.

the U.S. forces that were arriving in country to turn the war around.<sup>31</sup> The first surge of US troops during the buildup in 1965 arrived before there was a plan for their immediate utilization.<sup>32</sup> During this time the MACV staff was in a state of disarray as a result of expansion and the lack of a suitable, centralized facility to house the entire headquarters. In January of 1966, General Westmoreland told General Wheeler that “there are high security risks in almost every direction and that we are reacting as rapidly and as forcefully as we can with the force we are receiving.”<sup>33</sup> This illuminates how General Westmoreland’s propensity towards focusing on major combat operations was a result of his inability to focus on the entire system. This was due mostly to the fact that he was dealing with the immediate problem and its solution.

Westmoreland’s narrow field of view degraded his ability to see the problem holistically. Peter Senge discusses this phenomenon in his book *The Fifth Discipline* concerning how the necessity to respond to immediate crises degrades the ability to see a system in its entirety. In Westmoreland’s case, he saw what Senge describes as a Linear Cause and Effect Chain as opposed to a system of interrelationships.<sup>34</sup> Westmoreland’s need to “stop the bleeding” perpetuated itself over the next year and a half to the point where Search and Destroy became the modus operandi for MACV in the accomplishment of President Johnson’s strategic aim.

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<sup>31</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command*, 396.

<sup>32</sup> Herring, “Cold Blood,” discusses the vagaries of Johnson’s strategy-making, as does Rosson, “Involvement in Vietnam,” , 182–92.

<sup>33</sup> On slowness of buildup, see Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 153–54; Paper, Joel Meyerson, “Logistics in the Buildup,” 1989, CMH files; Msg, Westmoreland HWA 2419 to Wheeler, 16 Aug 66, tab C–2, Westmoreland Hist File 8 (17 Jul–17 Sep 66), CMH. On the South Vietnamese, see Memo, Chester L. Cooper for Walt Rostow, 8 Apr 66, Warnke Papers, McNaughton Files, box 1, LBJL; Palmer Interv, 1975, pp. 228–29, 232–33. Quote is from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 0006 to Sharp, 1 Jan 66, Westmoreland Msg Files, 1 Jan–31 Mar 66, CMH.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 73.

During 1967, Westmoreland's public affairs office became decisively engaged in President Johnson's effort to convince the American public of the fact that the allies were making progress in Vietnam. This information operations campaign plan received marginal results. On 28 April 1967, Westmoreland addressed a joint session of Congress. During his address to Congress, the general essentially reported that the enemy was on the verge of collapse and that the end was in sight.<sup>35</sup> The events that transpired less than a year later would completely discount Westmoreland's efforts at winning the media war and eliminate all credibility of the war in the eyes of the American public. Even though allied forces ultimately repelled the Tet offensive in 1968, the war was already lost in the United States.

Westmoreland's focus on the immediacy of preventing the fall of the South Vietnamese government because of increased enemy concentrations in 1966 forced him to focus his incoming forces on direct action as opposed to understanding the environment in its entirety. His focus on the media war in 1967, while well intentioned did not account for the fact that he was solving the wrong problem and ultimately led to MACV loss of credibility after Tet in 1968. All of this set conditions for his removal as commander of MACV in June of 1968.

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<sup>35</sup> Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shinning Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 152.

## Section II. Abrams Takes Over: MACV from 1968 to 1970

The Army Design Methodology encompasses one's ability to frame the operational environment, gain an understanding of the problem, and develop an approach to solving the problem. In order to assess General Abram's conduct of operational art, one must comprehensively apply these fundamental tenets of the Army Design Methodology to his actions and decisions during his tenure at the helm of the US military effort in Vietnam. This section will identify specific instances where General Abrams gained an understanding of his environment, identified the correct problem, and developed a sound approach to an appropriate solution from his assumption of command in 1968 until 1971.

Brigadier General Edward C. Cardon best encapsulated the essence of understanding the operational environment in his work *Unleashing Design*. He states, "Developing understanding is a continuous process, facilitated through dialog, collaboration, and circulation. Leaders can gain this understanding by leveraging multiple sources and perspectives and consulting with varied sources of knowledge."<sup>36</sup> For the purpose of this study, understanding will encompass military, political, and social/economic subcategories.

General Abrams' practice of operational art as viewed through the Army Design Methodology did not begin when he assumed command of MACV on 10 June 1968. However, the initial step of framing the environment in the Army Design Methodology began for him when he assumed duties as Westmoreland's deputy of MACV in May of 1967—a year prior to taking command. Fortune would have it that Westmoreland's preoccupation with tactical operations related to search and destroy caused him to focus Abrams' attention towards advice and

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<sup>36</sup> Cardon, "Unleashing Design," 6.

assistance of South Vietnamese armed forces.<sup>37</sup> He ultimately used this opportunity to set conditions for his future mission.

Abrams spent the majority of his year as deputy of MACV circulating the battlefield visiting South Vietnamese forces at all levels to gain insight on the status of leadership, equipment, and combat effectiveness. It was during this time that he realized the importance of the Regional Forces (RF) and the People's Forces (PF). These territorial forces would ultimately be the vanguard for the hamlets and villages against Viet Cong destabilization efforts in South Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> It was during this time that he also gained an appreciation of the significance of focusing on seizing the enemy's logistical supply routes to sustain the destabilization efforts in South Vietnam. His realization of the enemy's lack of transport assets and secure lines of communications led him to a new military approach to the war. These represented a significant departure from Westmoreland's search and destroy tactics.<sup>39</sup>

Abrams demonstrated a sound grasp of the political situation in South Vietnam and its importance in the success of coalition efforts against communist North Vietnam. His time as deputy commander of MACV allowed him to gain an understanding of the fragility of the government of South Vietnam. He knew the background behind the problems that plagued the government originating with Diem and the corruption that ensued—all this compounded by the infiltration of North Vietnamese sympathizers.

Abrams best demonstrated his awareness of the political environment and its importance with his handling of rocket attacks in the city of Saigon. This was an earlier point of contention during the Westmoreland years. Westmoreland was of the mindset that it would be virtually

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<sup>37</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 214.

<sup>38</sup> Cardon, "Unleashing Design," 11.

<sup>39</sup> Dewey Canyon, "Indochina: A Cavalryman's Way Out," *Time Magazine* (15 April 1971): 26.



impossible to prevent such attacks without severely detracting from conventional military efforts in his search and destroy strategy. Additionally, Westmoreland felt that loss of civilians in Saigon was of no real military consequence.<sup>40</sup>

Abrams, on the other hand, recognized the importance of stability in the capitol city in facilitating stability amongst an already challenged government. He saw that South Vietnam's leadership could not effectively function in the midst of a virtual siege brought about by rocket attacks conducted by Viet-Cong in surrounding areas. As a result, he placed emphasis on eradicating the threat of rocket attacks in and around the city of Saigon.<sup>41</sup> This clearly showed his appreciation for the political situation and its potential impact on efforts to neutralize North Vietnamese influence in the country.

Abrams was also astutely cognizant of the advantage that the enemy derived from the antiwar movement in the United States as evidenced during the Democratic National Convention in August of 1968. He expressed concern regarding the enemy having substantial negotiating material in the form of 1,000 Democrats that wanted to derail the U.S. position in Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> This was amidst the backdrop a recent third offensive conducted by North Vietnam, in which they achieved minimal results. He knew that if Xuan Thieu, the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister, were to propose a ceasefire at that time, he would have gotten a much better deal than the operational situation in Vietnam would have dictated—simply because of the politically vulnerable state of affairs in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hoang Ngoc Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-69*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 93

<sup>42</sup> John S. Bowman, *The Vietnam War Almanac* (New Delhi, India: Pharos Publishing Company 2005), 211.

<sup>43</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 107

Detailed analysis of the political aspects of a particular environment will most times lead to an understanding of the social and economic dynamics of the environment. Abrams realized early on that the population should be the focus of all the efforts in Vietnam. He demonstrated his knowledge of the social environment in 1968 with the addition of 10,000 men to the police force in a new Police Field Force initiative. This increase in police forces (totaling 80,000) called for a new outlook as to how to use them. His immediate assessment was that the police were essential to rooting out the enemy infrastructure and extending the influence of the government. Ultimately, he emphasized that the people were the center of all efforts by the government of South Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

Abrams immersed himself in his environment through collaboration with multiple sources. These efforts began prior to his assumption of command of MACV and aided in his ability to focus his staff. This ultimately led to his ability to identify the problem at hand. In the Army Design Methodology, the environmental frame goes hand-in-hand and can, often times, occur concurrently with the problem frame. Problem framing entails identifying and isolating the root causes of a particular conflict and determining what problem to solve. Initial problem framing occurs during the environmental frame with the refinement of the understanding of the existing conflict between current conditions and ideal future conditions. The goal of problem framing is to analyze the potential of operational variables to facilitate (or hinder) transformation and how one can take advantage of environmental momentum to achieve the desired conditions.<sup>45</sup>

Abrams took full advantage of the benefit of hindsight in identifying the problem in Vietnam. His service as the Deputy Commander of MACV allowed him to observe the pitfalls endured by General Westmoreland prior to his removal as commander. Just as the year he served

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<sup>44</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 148.

<sup>45</sup> Cardon, "Unleashing Design," 9.

as deputy allowed him to gain insights as to understanding the environment, it equally gave him the opportunity to discern what the fundamental problem was. While he did benefit from his post as Deputy Commander of MACV regarding identifying the problem, he did not rest on his laurels and assume he knew what the problem was when he took command. This is the fundamental difference between his success and the shortcomings of General Westmoreland.

Before Abrams' arrival in Vietnam, there was a substantial lack of clarity concerning the objectives of the operational effort. Douglas Kinnard conducted a survey of all general officer level commanders in Vietnam. The overwhelming response to the survey was that the operational and strategic objectives were neither clear nor understandable. Nearly seventy percent of the general officers polled were not confident in their understanding of the objectives.<sup>46</sup> This lack of clarity was a result of the ambiguity that plagued the senior leadership of the Vietnam War from the President and the National Command Authorities to General Westmoreland.

When Abrams assumed command of MACV, he was quoted as saying "I wanted to take a serious look at what my job was, what my mission was, what they wanted me to do, and what they expected me to get done. So I immediately put some people to work gathering official documents so I could study it and get myself oriented on the chain of command and so on."<sup>47</sup> He quickly realized after doing this that the situation was clouded beyond comprehension. As a result, he organized a study group to define the problem and layout the mission of MACV.

The result was a long-range plan later published as the *MACV Objectives Plan*. The nucleus of this study was the emphasis on security for the population by way of interdicting enemy insurgency efforts in the hamlets and villages of rural South Vietnam. Complimentary to the security of the population was the increase in effectiveness of the territorial forces (Regional

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<sup>46</sup> Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, September 17, 2007), 24-25.

<sup>47</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 123.

Forces and People's Forces) and the police.<sup>48</sup> The significance of this study was the fact that he initiated this study of his own volition in an effort to visualize his problem. He did not wait for clarity from Washington or an order from the President or the Secretary of defense.

General Abrams delved further into the problem frame by identifying root causes of declining popularity of U.S. forces amongst the South Vietnamese populace. He deduced that the South Vietnamese villagers were just as fearful of bombs dropped by U.S. forces as they were of enemy attacks.<sup>49</sup> The identification of this problem allowed him to emphasize to his commanders a new mindset. The use of restraint would be one of many new watchwords in the lexicon of post-Tet operations in Vietnam. Concern for population security would prove essential to the success that MACV would experience in building South Vietnamese capacity over the ensuing two years.

In addition to the problem identified concerning the insurgency in Vietnam, Abrams had to factor domestic political factors into the equation. By the time he assumed command of MACV, Tet had already taken place and the war, in the eyes of the American public, had already been lost. Ensuing budgetary decisions in Washington initiated the "Redeployment" of forces from Vietnam. While Abrams recognized this as a problem in his efforts at pacification, he forwarded in a written report that "the present and programmed U.S./Free World forces are adequate to cope with the enemy forces in South Vietnam and those known to be infiltrating."<sup>50</sup> While this seemed like a capitulation to the President, it was an indication of General Abrams having properly identified the correct problem. He always believed that the true problem concerning U.S. troop levels in Vietnam was not the shortage of manpower however; the problem

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<sup>48</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 125.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>50</sup> Clark Clifford, Memorandum for the President "Trip to South Vietnam, July 13-18, 1968", Clifford Papers, Vietnam Files, Box 5, LBJ Library.

was how those forces were utilized. This notion bore itself out as he never once asked for troop increases during his four-year tenure as commander of MACV.<sup>51</sup>

Abrams demonstrated how a clear and concise problem statement succinctly described the correct problem set to solve. His initiative, devoid of influence from Washington, spawned an independent study, which clearly stated the correct problem for him and all of his subordinate commanders. This allowed him to develop an operational approach to solving the correct problem. When a commander successfully conducts an environmental and problem frame, the Army Design Methodology provides a means of approximating complex problems that allows for meaningful action.<sup>52</sup> Meaningful action can only take place following the consideration and analysis of operational approaches.

The operational approach is a conceptualization of the actions that will produce the conditions that define the desired end state.<sup>53</sup> This is, in essence, how the commander synchronizes assets and activities to link the current environmental conditions to the desired conditions. The synchronization of assets and activities to achieve the strategic endstate is operational art. General Abrams developed the operational approach to the conduct of the Vietnam War precisely in accordance with the fundamentals of the Army Design Methodology. The environmental and problem frame conducted by the staff at MACV directed them towards the operational approach. This approach was the One War strategy.

General Abrams' One War strategy is closely related to, what is described in today's lexicon as Full Spectrum Operations. That is, all aspects of warfare, from general high intensity

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<sup>51</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Grigsby, "Integrated Planning," 30.

<sup>53</sup> FM 5-0 applies the operational approach in a broader context better suited to the future operational environment, where complex, ill-structured problems are the norm. This description of the operational approach ensures that it is framed by the commander and staff during design and not limited to center of gravity analysis during deliberate planning. p. 3-11.

conflict to actions conducted in support of stable peace must be taken into consideration. When General Westmoreland was in command of MACV, his focus was on the conduct of conventional high intensity conflict at the brigade and division levels. He consistently disregarded the importance of population centric aspects of counterinsurgency and the enemy's Self-Defense forces that were part of the Viet Cong infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> This narrowed view of an operational approach led to three years of tactical actions that did not link the current environment to future desired environmental conditions.

The One War concept emphasized the fact that conventional military operations and population centric efforts were not mutually exclusive. Specifically, One War strategy encompassed the use of conventional operations focused on the interdiction of enemy logistics lines of communication in the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam and counterinsurgency efforts in the form of pacification. Pacification entailed the improvement of South Vietnamese local forces and the denial of the Viet Cong influence in villages and hamlets. Under the One War concept, detailed intelligence underpinned interdiction and pacification efforts. General Abrams encapsulated the One War strategy in an excerpt of guidance to his senior commanders in which he stated,

The body count does not have much to do with the outcome of the war. Some of the things I do think are important are that we preempt or defeat the enemy's major military operations and eliminate or render ineffective the major portion of his guerillas and his infrastructure—the political, administrative and paramilitary structure on which his whole movement depends. It is far more significant that we neutralize 1,000 of these guerillas and infrastructure than kill 10,000 North Vietnamese Soldiers.<sup>55</sup>

The interdiction effort concentrated on North Vietnam's ability to resupply the Viet Cong effort to destabilize the environment and delegitimize the government in South Vietnam. The center of gravity for the North Vietnamese effort was the Ho Chi Minh Trail—a logistical system

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<sup>54</sup> Sam Adams, *A War of Numbers* (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 1998), 55.

<sup>55</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 42.

that ran from North Vietnam through the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, feeding both manpower and resources into South Vietnam.<sup>56</sup> This is where General Abrams focused the preponderance of major combat operations efforts. Complimented by Seventh Air Force assets, high intensity conflict assets would focus on closing off key choke points as well as road and river avenues infiltrating into South Vietnam. This approach proved effective from the fall of 1968 slowly debilitating North Vietnamese efforts that were already weakened from the Tet offensive earlier that spring. Bui Tin, a former Colonel in the People's Army of Vietnam recalls that, had it not been for President Nixon's withdrawal of forces in 1969, American efforts against the Ho Chi Minh Trail lines of communication would have fatally diminished North Vietnamese ability to have influence in the South.<sup>57</sup>

The pacification aspect of the One War strategy was, by Abrams' account, the most important. Conventional warfare nested within and supported the effort to legitimize the government of South Vietnam and secure the population. Guidance he gave his subordinate commanders in late 1969 emphasized this point:

I know the fighting is important. I know they've got to, if the 324 Bravo comes charging down Route 547 into Hue, you've got to get out there and really *lick* them. But all of these things in the pacification, where the machinery of the government and the philosophy that President Thieu is—building the village and the hamlet, and really building a base there and so on. I really think that, of all things, that is the most important. There is where the battle will be won.<sup>58</sup>

General Abrams believed that the Regional Forces and People's Forces was the centerpiece of pacification in Vietnam. These territorial forces would remain at their homes,

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<sup>56</sup> Merle Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Young, "How North Vietnam Won the War", Interview with Bui Tin. *Wall Street Journal* (3 August 1995).

<sup>58</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 169.

secure the population, and rout out Viet Cong disruption efforts. He paid particular attention to the improvement of these forces by sending competent advisory teams to work with them. By 1968, MACV had 250 teams working with Territorial Forces throughout the country.<sup>59</sup>

The main measure of effectiveness was a drastic departure from General Westmoreland's Body Count, which dominated the psyche of the military and political leadership from 1964 until 1968. He implemented the Hamlet Evaluation System to measure success in Vietnam. This system assessed hamlets into one of six categories regarding levels of security. These assessments were briefed by region at every MACV Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update. This gave him a valid measurement of trends to assess how the interdiction and pacification efforts were doing within the One War framework.<sup>60</sup>

Even though the term Army Design Methodology did not exist in 1968, General Abrams executed their fundamentals naturally through adaptive and critical thinking. He framed his environment while he was the deputy commander of MACV under Westmoreland allowing him to begin to identify the problem. He commissioned a study group, of his own initiative, to identify the correct problems to solve in Vietnam. As a result of his environmental and problem frame, he was able to chart a path that linked his current environmental conditions to the desired strategic conditions. The resulting operational approach was the One War strategy. The events that transpired from 1970 to 1972 would prove the effectiveness of General Abrams use of the Army Design Methodology in the practice of operational art.

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<sup>59</sup> Volney F. Warner, 24 June, 1968 Trip Report to Ambassador William Leonhart (Carlisle Pennsylvania: U.S. Military Research Institute).

<sup>60</sup> Richard A. Hunt, *The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*(Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 204.



### **Section III. Vietnamization: A Reframing Moment**

The conduct of General Abrams and the MACV staff in the year following his assumption of command clearly demonstrated the application of the three tenets of the Army Design Methodology. There is however, an enduring aspect of the Army Design Methodology that is essential to the process and the practice of operational art in complex and ill-defined problems.

The nature of a complex and ill-defined problem is its inherent unpredictability and constant change. In keeping with this nature, a leader in this type of environment must possess the ability to maintain situational awareness regarding changes in the operational environment.<sup>61</sup> Often times, commanders develop an operational approach to a specific problem and become complacent in the unreality that the environment and the problem will stay the same throughout the course of the mission or campaign. Reframing of a particular problem in the Army Design Methodology is a vital aspect of the process. This is the iterative part of the process that must be continuously assessed to ensure that the staff is solving the right problem—as the problem within a particular environment can and will change.

General Abrams maintained situational awareness of his environment and the changes that impacted his operational approach to the Vietnam War. This allowed him to adjust his operational approach by reframing his environment. His ability to adjust accordingly to the changes in his environment, primarily brought on by decisions in Washington, allowed him to focus his staff and subordinate commanders in a continued effort to achieve the operational endstate. President Nixon's election to office on the campaign promise of an honorable exit out of

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<sup>61</sup> Cardon, "Unleashing Design," 11.

the war would eventually place a strain on operational efforts in the region.<sup>62</sup> General Abrams realized that the environment was changing from a resource and manpower perspective and adjusted accordingly. The results of the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive of 1972 were a testament to this. MACV was able to accomplish the same operational results in 1972 with less than twenty percent of the forces they had in 1968.

This section will focus on how General Abrams responded to the task of maintaining the mission of Vietnamization while enduring drastic troop reductions and constraints placed on him as a result of domestic political conditions at the time. The events that transpired from 1970 to 1972, culminating with the Spring Offensive of 1972 will serve as proof of principle of his overall execution of the Army Design Methodology as well as the ability to reframe the environment and adjust the operational approach accordingly.

The impetus for General Abrams' main example of reframing began with President Lyndon Johnson's decision to not mobilize the reserves in support of the buildup of forces in 1965. This led to the national command authority's reliance on conscription to support the necessary combat power required to support the strategic endstate from 1965 to 1968. Coupled with the growing domestic social tensions at the time, the Army's increase in the conscripted force from 11 to 47 percent of the total force created a military that mirrored the American society at the time.<sup>63</sup> This resulted in an Army in 1970 that was wrought with drug and alcohol abuse, professional misconduct, and racial unrest—all of this was underpinned by the lack of seasoned Non-Commissioned Officer leadership as a byproduct of five years of over-

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 96.

<sup>63</sup> Robert K. Griffith, *The U.S. Army's Transition to an All-Volunteer Force: 1968-1974* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1997), 24-25.

conscription.<sup>64</sup> While this was not the main crux of the situation in Vietnam, it was a contributing factor to the overall readiness of forces and ultimately, their performance.

Where Westmoreland was ambivalent to this problem as it began to metastasize in 1967, Abrams was well aware of the requisite adjustments regarding the Army's social afflictions. He realized that it was not the Army that he fought with in World War II, nor was it the Army of 1963. As a result, his actions entailed an emphasis on frequent battlefield circulation. This began with Abrams making himself visible to his subordinate commanders. This was followed by explicit instructions to his subordinate commanders to emulate his actions. While he knew that the problems that persisted in the Army could not be solved during the conflict, he was aware of them and he directed actions that would help mitigate them. This helped shape decisions that he made in his broad operational approach in the conduct of Vietnamization.<sup>65</sup>

The aforementioned problems that plagued the Army in 1970 were part of a much larger dilemma that General Abrams would have to deal with as he continued his One War strategy. The election of President Nixon brought the implementation of an almost immediate effort to end the war in Vietnam. Nixon's campaign platform was that of an end to the war in Vietnam with honor. The rate of troop withdrawal thereafter would become the most divisive policy issue among senior leadership in Washington. This was primarily an effort to appease the domestic political opposition of the war<sup>66</sup>

As a result, beginning in 1970, MACV saw reductions in troop strengths over the ensuing two years that were at a greater rate than the build up of troops in the four years between 1964 and 1968. In 1964, military end strengths in Vietnam totaled 17,280 troops. Between 1964 and

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<sup>64</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 298.

<sup>65</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 294.

<sup>66</sup> Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 32-33.

1966, troop levels increased from 17,280 to 317,007. At the beginning of Fiscal Year 1968, the number of service members in Vietnam had reached 537,377. By the time President Nixon assumed office in January of 1969, troop strengths in Vietnam stood at 535,454. At the beginning of Fiscal Year 1972, troops strengths dropped to 69,242—a nearly 90 percent reduction of forces in less than two years (See Figure 1).<sup>67</sup>

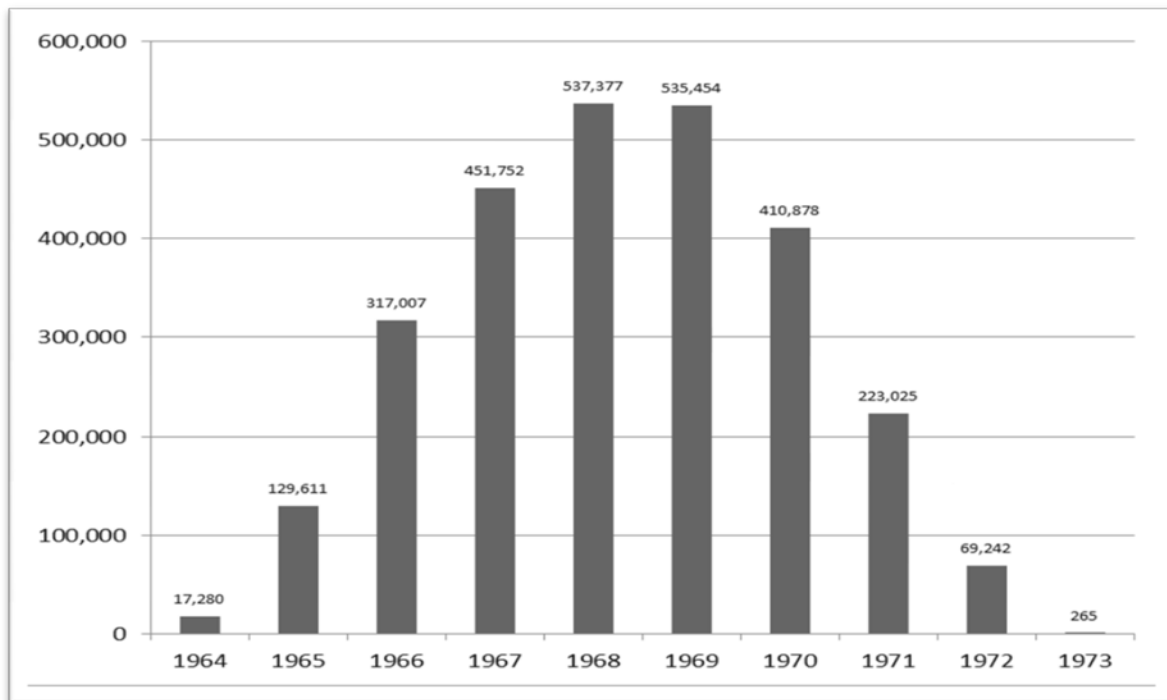


Figure 1. U.S. Army Troop Levels in Vietnam from 1964 until 1973

These drastic reductions came at the same time in which General Abrams had enacted the One War strategy. He recognized the changing political atmosphere that followed the Tet Offensive. With the reductions in troops and fiscal resources, he realized that it would require a different approach with regards to the utilization of assets to achieve the desired results. He

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<sup>67</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Personnel & Procurement Reports and Data Files* <<http://www.siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/>> accessed on (17 December 2011).

recognized the need to adjust his operational approach to fit the changing environment by shifting the focus of dwindling combat power. In early 1970, General Abrams discussed the issues with his senior commanders regarding the environment and the problem to include the newly imposed government restraints. He informed them as he had previously informed General Wheeler and Secretary Laird of his intention to shift talent from U.S. units to the advisory efforts.<sup>68</sup> He set the tone himself by serving as chief advisor to the Vietnamese leadership in an effort to emphasize the importance of his new direction.<sup>69</sup>

General Abrams' ability to reframe and accordingly adjust his operational approach allowed him to avoid the trap of continuing to solve the wrong problem. His recognition of social problems, which infected the Army as a result of President Johnson's decision to forego mobilizing of the reserves in 1964, enabled him to enact measures that would encourage senior leader involvement and battlefield circulation. He also recognized the changing political environment that accompanied the election of President Nixon. He adjusted accordingly to the imposition of budget cuts and drastic troop withdrawals by shifting the leadership talent within his resource pool to the advisor effort in anticipation of the need to hasten the empowerment of the ARVN. The reframing measures enacted by General Abrams would set conditions for success that the ARVN would encounter from 1970 until his departure in 1972. Of significance were the Cambodia campaign of 1970 and the Spring Offensive of 1972. These operations would eventually validate General Abrams' actions up to this point. Thus far, this body of work has discussed the actions of General Abrams after he assumed command of MACV and analyzed them within the context of the Army Design Methodology. In order to validate the success of his innate use of the Army Design Methodology, there must be an examination of cases in which his efforts came to fruition. This section will examine the Cambodia campaign of 1970 and the

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<sup>68</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 183.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 182.

Spring Offensive of 1972. The success of the ARVN forces in these campaigns will serve as proof of principle for his successful environmental frame and operational approach toward the execution of the One War strategy and Vietnamization.

## Section IV. MACV from 1970 to 1972: Proof of Principle

By 1969, General Abrams had established his intent throughout his command regarding the One War Strategy and the importance of a comprehensive approach to the simultaneous denial of enemy sanctuaries within South Vietnam and the disruption of NVA lines of communication.<sup>70</sup> A major cause for consternation amongst the MACV staff and the South Vietnamese effort was the effectiveness of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Ho Chi Minh trail was a logistical resupply system that spanned from the North Vietnam to South Vietnam through the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia. The system facilitated the influx of manpower, weapons, and ammunition, to the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army operating in various regions of South Vietnam throughout the entire war.<sup>71</sup> Of particular interest was the Cambodian border with Military Region Three which encompassed the vital South Vietnamese stronghold of Saigon.

The enemy's ability to escape into Cambodia when the pressure became unbearable gave them sanctuary from coalition forces and the ability to reorganize and refit. This was a source of frustration for MACV and the execution of Vietnamization. Prior to 1970, the only means to target these sanctuaries were covert air strikes and ARVN incursions. A bloodless coup, that replaced Prince Sihanouk with Prime Minister Lon Nol, a pro-American General, changed the previously mentioned predicament. Cambodia's implicit support of North Vietnam dissolved as the Cambodian Army, with ARVN assistance, unsuccessfully tried to remove the Communists from its regions that bordered South Vietnam. The failure of the Cambodian government to remove the North Vietnamese forced Lon Nol to request American assistance to expel the North

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<sup>70</sup> Message, Abrams to McCain and Moorer, MAC 6774, 181631Z.

<sup>71</sup> Merle Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 28.

Vietnamese from Cambodia. This cleared the path for a ground incursion into Cambodia by MACV and ARVN forces.<sup>72</sup>

The aim established by General Abrams was the denial of NVA safe havens within Cambodia with the overarching objective of reducing the enemy threat for a period in which pacification, consolidation and force improvement by the South Vietnamese could continue. This would facilitate the continued withdrawal of U.S. forces—thus nesting within President Nixon’s goal of a fast exit out of the war.<sup>73</sup>

On 30 April 1970, II Field Force and the III ARVN Corps conducted a combined operational offensive into Cambodia to destroy Communist bases in the “Fishhook,” “Parrot’s Beak,” and “Angel’s Wing” areas.<sup>74</sup> The operation transpired with III ARVN Corps in the lead with U.S. II Field Force units following in support two days after. MACV demonstrated seamless mission command by coordinating the maneuver of ARVN forces through the liaison of competent advisors. They also supported operations through the use of air support for resupply and strategic bombing. The operation in Cambodia was executed all the while remaining forces in South Vietnam were continuing to exploit the Vietcong isolation through counterinsurgency operations. This was a prime example of General Abrams’ One War strategy—the prosecution of war across the full spectrum of conflict.<sup>75</sup> The result of the Cambodian campaign was the acquisition of huge collections of intelligence, the capture of large amounts of supply, and the degradation of North Vietnamese forces ability to influence Military Regions Three and Four for

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<sup>72</sup> John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 31; MAJ Richard K. Dembowsky, III U.S. Army, *Eating Dinner with a Fork, Spoon, and Knife: How a corps executed MACV's One War Strategy* (Ft Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2009), 31.

<sup>73</sup> Sir Robert Thompson, *Peace is Not at Hand* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 78.

<sup>74</sup> Headquarters, II Field Force, “Letter of Instruction (Operations in Cambodia),” II Field Force, APO San Francisco, 96266, 1, CARL.

<sup>75</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 96-101.



the next two years—thus meeting the operational intent of buying time for the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the continuation of Vietnamization.<sup>76</sup>

Cambodia campaign served as an indicator of General Abrams' ability to develop a sound operational approach using critical and creative thinking. He realized that the focus on solely lethal operations had been unsuccessful prior to his assumption of command. He was able to frame his environment through battlefield circulation and analysis. His implementation of the One War strategy paid dividends in the Cambodia campaign as evidenced by the simultaneity of lethal operations by II Field Force and ARVN forces in Cambodia with the continuance of counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam. This was a direct result of the operational approach developed by General Abrams based off his environmental and problem frame. Even though it would be nearly two years before North Vietnamese forces were able to mount a legitimate offensive into the south, this delay would be followed by the Spring Offensive of 1972.<sup>77</sup>

The Spring Offensive of 1972 was a three pronged, high intensity conflict operation that coincided with the goal of gaining leverage at the tail end of the Paris Peace Accords. The North Vietnamese committed virtually their entire combat force to this effort. This included fourteen divisions, twenty-six separate regiments and a formidable compliment of armor and artillery support.<sup>78</sup> The three prongs of this offensive incursion consisted of efforts in the north, central, and southern areas of South Vietnam. This operation initiated on 30 March 1972.

In the north, NVA elements attacked south in an attempt to envelop the cities of Quang Tri, Dong Ha, and Cam Lo. A day later, North Vietnamese pushed forces into the central

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<sup>76</sup> William A. Hamilton, "The Influence of The American Military Upon United States Foreign Policy, 1965-1968" (Unpublished Dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1978).

<sup>77</sup> Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1979), 182.

<sup>78</sup> Ngo Quang Truong, LTG, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1977), 13.

highlands centered on the cities of Dak To, Kontum as well as the port city of Qui Nhon. In the south, NVA elements in Cambodia conducted cross-border incursions with intention of destroying ARVN forces in the cities of Loc Ninh, Quan Loi, An Loc, and Tay Ninh. In summary, six enemy divisions had attacked three fronts.<sup>79</sup>

The North Vietnamese initially saw sweeping success in the north and the center while ARVN forces in the south successfully thwarted NVA attacks throughout the operation. With certain disaster looming in the north because of poor ARVN leadership, President Thieu, at the advice of General Abrams, transferred General Truong, the commander of ARVN forces in Military Region 3, who was successful in the south, to Military Region 1. This move turned the tide of the offensive in the favor of the ARVN.<sup>80</sup>

The U.S. support of the ARVN during this operation came primarily in the form of air support. While the NVA exploited vulnerabilities in the north, their efforts in the center also experienced initial success. The NVA efforts in the central highlands nearly proved successful had it not been for pre-planned B-52 strikes in Kontum.<sup>81</sup> Intelligence also played a significant role in MACV support for ARVN forces. MACV intelligence elements tracked personnel infiltrations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, identified and exploited locations of enemy units, and followed their movements. They also advised ARVN counterparts and assisted them in developing highly capable interrogation and document exploitation centers.<sup>82</sup>

The effective use of air assets as well as intelligence by General Abrams and MACV was a prime example the iterative process of re-framing in a complex environment. By the time the

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<sup>79</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 320.

<sup>80</sup> Cao Van Vien, General, *Leadership* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1981), 138-139.

<sup>81</sup> Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 98.

<sup>82</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 340.

Easter offensive began in 1972, U.S. troop strengths in Vietnam were below 70,000 (See Figure 1). This was a significant reduction from a year prior. General Abrams and the MACV staff recognized the changing environment beginning in 1969 and adjusted decisive efforts to compensate for diminishing assets. This was evident in the effective use of intelligence and air power to support the ARVN.<sup>83</sup>

The One War operational approach directly resulted in the tactical success that the ARVN experienced in the 1972 Easter Offensive. This was most evident in the improvement that South Vietnamese government displayed as well as many of the tactical ARVN commanders. President Thieu's decision to relieve his commander in the north and replace him with Truong was instrumental in ARVN success. Thieu also provided sound guidance to his joint staff and circulated the battlefield with many of his reliable generals.<sup>84</sup> This was undoubtedly a result of General Abrams' insistence on the transition of emphasis from U.S. led, ground combat operations to advisory efforts. The result was tactical victory for the ARVN and over 40,000 NVA soldiers killed. The number of NVA soldiers killed is not as important as who inflicted the casualties. With the exception of air power, the ARVN had successfully demonstrated that they were fully capable of defending their sovereign territory. The operational endstate of General Abrams nested within the strategic and political desires of the Nixon Administration.

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<sup>83</sup> William E. Potts, AUSA Annual Meeting, Washington D.C., October 1995.

<sup>84</sup> Message, Abrams to Laird, MAC 03757, 241111Z APR 1972, Center for Military History.

## Conclusion

Design is a critical thinking methodology that is best suited for problems of a complex nature. The underlying premise of complexity is that its characteristics are features of one's perceptions and understanding. An individual sees the world as increasingly complex and chaotic because they use the inadequate concepts to explain it. When one understands something, they no longer see it as complex.<sup>85</sup> The ability to navigate a complex environment requires an effective systems methodology that utilizes holistic thinking to observe an environment and all of its interdependent variables and the causal relationships.<sup>86</sup> If done adequately, one can develop an approach to solving a problem within a system to achieve a desired result. This is the essence of the Army Design Methodology.

General Westmoreland's tenure as commander of MACV was a prime example of inability to recognize complexity. The lack of recognition of complexity degraded his ability to view the environment holistically causing the development of an operational approach that was inadequate for the environment.

The main issue that hampered General Westmoreland's ability to visualize the environment and develop a sound operational approach was the lack of strategic clarity within the Johnson Administration. The lack of a goal, in any endeavor, usually leads one to progressing in the wrong direction. Dietrich Dörner discusses this in depth in his book *The Logic of Failure*. Dörner describes how not breaking down a complex goal into partial ones leads to the search for

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<sup>85</sup> Jashmid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity* (Oxford, UK: Elsevier, 2006), 25.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 107.

things that are malfunctioning within a system. Once they find them, their immediate goal becomes fixing whatever is broken.<sup>87</sup>

This is not necessarily an indictment on General Westmoreland. History has often times affixed the preponderance of blame for the loss of the Vietnam War on General Westmoreland. Many forget the fact that General Westmoreland, with the help of General Fosythe, was instrumental in overseeing the transition from conscription to an all-volunteer force in the 1970s.<sup>88</sup> While this study does highlight how Westmoreland failed to identify and dedicate proper resources to solving the correct problem in Vietnam, many of the circumstances that existed in Washington dictated the decisions that he would make.

The Johnson administration was unable to convey a clear and unified objective as a result of its disjointedness. The lack of synchronization between President Johnson's advisors and the Joint Chiefs spawn unclear and often conflicting strategic guidance on the conduct of the Vietnam War. President Johnson was sending clear indications of his intention to escalate the war to his military commanders in Vietnam while simultaneously sending an opposing message to the media and the American people. This lack of a unified goal caused the operational commanders to apply solutions to immediate problems without viewing the entire system holistically—just as Dörner outlines in *The Logic of Failure*.

General Abrams executed the tenets of the Army Design Methodology the moment he landed in Vietnam. His first year under General Westmoreland as the Deputy Commander of MACV enabled him to conduct battlefield circulation observing troops, equipment as well as meeting with Vietnamese government officials. Westmoreland's fixation on the major combat operation functions of the Vietnam War relegated Abrams to the issues related to stability and

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<sup>87</sup> Dietrich Dörner, *The Logic of Failure* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 59.

<sup>88</sup> Robert K. Griffith Jr., *The U.S. Army's Transition to the All-Volunteer Force* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1997), 63.

counterinsurgency operations. These operations were vital to success in Vietnam. Abrams' experience allowed him to get a head start on framing his environment. He took advantage of this opportunity and was able to understand the environment to an extent in which he could deduce the fundamental problem that needed to be solved.

When Abrams assumed command of MACV he took a serious look at what his job was, what the intent of the President was, and how the Nixon administration expected him to accomplish the mission. He immediately put a working group together to work gathering official documents so that he could study it and orient himself on the chain of command and all relating factors.<sup>89</sup> After realizing the situation was clouded beyond comprehension, he organized a study group to define the problem and layout the mission of MACV. The result was the *MACV Objectives Plan*. He was able to identify the fundamental problem with greater clarity and consider more accurately how to solve it.<sup>90</sup> As a result, he developed the One War strategy as his operational approach. This was the concept of full spectrum operations that dictated that major combat operations and counterinsurgency operations were not mutually exclusive.

General Abrams continuously reframed his environment as he was developing and implementing his strategy based on the domestic political situation in the United States. The increase in dependence on the draft in 1965 imported the social problems that plagued the United States, into the Army in Vietnam. This, coupled with the decrease of U.S. forces from 537,000 troops in 1969 to less than 70,000 in 1972, imposed significant challenges to himself and the MACV staff. He re-framed and adjusted his operational approach by increasing the emphasis on the advisory mission and strongly encouraging leader involvement in troop morale issues.

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<sup>89</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 123.

<sup>90</sup> U.S. Department of the Army Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington D.C: Government printing Office [GPO], 26 March 2010), 3-6.

The Cambodia campaign of 1970 and the Spring Offensive of 1972 validated the success of General Abrams' use of the Army Design Methodology. The improvement of the ARVN as a result of the increased emphasis on the advisory mission was instrumental in the success of the South Vietnamese forces in the Cambodia campaign. His One War strategy came to fruition as the Strategic Hamlet program was able to continue during the major combat operations in Cambodia. During the Spring Offensive of 1972, ARVN combined arms operations as well as South Vietnamese government empowerment were instrumental in their ability to repel a major NVA incursion consisting of 14 divisions.

Design is a conceptual part of the planning process, which complements detailed planning.<sup>91</sup> More importantly, the essence of the Army Design Methodology is not new to the operational art. Operational artists, such as General Abrams, possess the innate cognitive creativity and adaptability that naturally lead them to execute design and have done so long before the inception of the term. General Abrams' performance as commander of MACV presented a sound historical example of the practical application of operational art as viewed through the lens of the Army Design Methodology. In accordance with the desired outcome of design, he visualized the environment and developed an approach that achieved a future endstate.

The fact that the Vietnam War ended in strategic failure was a result of political circumstances beyond the control of General Abrams and the operational artists at MACV. Domestic pressure in the United States ultimately forced congress to cut off funding for military operations in Vietnam after August 1973.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, the Watergate crisis exacerbated the helplessness of the situation and emboldened the North Vietnamese and the achievement of their

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<sup>91</sup> Colonel Wayne W. Grigsby, Jr., U.S. Army; Dr. Scott Gorman; Colonel Jack Marr, U.S. Army; Lieutenant Colonel Joseph McLamb, U.S. Army; Dr. Michael Stewart; and Dr. Pete Schifferle, "Integrated Planning The Operations Process, Design, and the Military Decision Making Process." *Military Review*, (January-February 2011): 29.

<sup>92</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 364.

endstate. That notwithstanding, Abrams was able to accomplish President Nixon's desired endstate.

Operational art is the sequencing of tactical actions, in time and space to achieve strategic objectives as defined by Army Doctrine Publication 3-0.<sup>93</sup> The Army Design Methodology engages critical thinking mechanisms to help commanders understand what to solve and how to develop a plan to sequence the abovementioned tactical actions to achieve the strategic objective. Additionally, the Army Design Methodology accounts for a continuously changing environment and the need to adapt to it. By this rational, the use of the tenets of the Army Design Methodology to examine a historical case study, such as General Abrams in the Vietnam War, demonstrate how design is a useful tool to assess operational art.

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<sup>93</sup> U.S. Department of the Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington D.C: Government printing Office [GPO], October 2011), 9.



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